United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/20

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Presbyterian Church (USA), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61078 (E) 151211

Please recycle

Statement

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its predecessor denominations have consistently worked for the rights of women in church and society. In consultation with partners around the world, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has recognized women's importance in shaping development policy. Women's organizations began forming in the Presbyterian Church in the early 1800s. They led the way in advocacy on a variety of issues, including gender justice. Presbyterians, including women's groups, have worked, and continue to work, for the eradication of poverty and hunger through financial and personal support of feeding programmes and initiatives that address the root causes of poverty and hunger in their own communities and around the world.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its international mission partners, including members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, recognize the important roles that women play in sustainable development and ending hunger and poverty.

Food security

Hunger and malnutrition owing to food insecurity are increasing. Communities where resources were once abundant now struggle to provide adequate food. Food-producing land is often reserved for agribusinesses rather than for local farms. This lack of access to, and ownership of, farming/fishing land compounds the challenges to rural food security. The lack of farm inputs, such as seeds and fertilizer and the need for better farming methods, exacerbate these challenges.

Access to clean water and effective irrigation methods continue to be problematic despite the advances made through the initiatives of the Millennium Development Goals. These problems disproportionately affect women living in rural areas.

Presbyterian General Assemblies have long advocated for food security and justice in the policies that Governments enact, as in a 1981 call to the President and Congress of the United States of America to cease and desist from employing food as a weapon of diplomacy and to make the elimination of hunger the primary focus of the relationship of the United States with developing countries.

The 212th General Assembly (2000) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) instructed the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment to: study the impact of multinational corporations on the decline of rural communities and their social fabric; advise the trustees and foundations of the church's governing bodies about any corporate shareholder resolutions that could have either a deleterious or positive impact on rural communities and, where possible, to take action on such resolutions in support of family farmers and ranchers; and advocate within the multinational corporation systems on behalf of the vitality and stability of rural communities, and on behalf of family farmers and ranchers.

In response to the recent global food crisis, the 218th General Assembly (2008) urged the church to appeal to all Presbyterians to donate to a special fund to support our overseas partners, produce relevant resources to raise awareness of this crisis, and advocate with the United States Government, the World Bank and other organizations to increase financial assistance for agricultural development.

Access to education

Presbyterians affirm the importance of free, public education. Reports from women around the world indicate that high rates of illiteracy hinder the development potential of girls and women. Access to education is particularly challenging in rural areas owing to the lack of infrastructure, trained teachers and schools.

Early marriages and pregnancies, imbalances in caregiving and childcare responsibilities, cultural norms and financial need may prevent women from taking advantage of educational opportunities in rural areas in the United States and around the world.

Education related to nutrition, health and hygiene, farming practices and income-generating skills can increase the development opportunities not only for women but also for their whole communities.

Access to medical care

Presbyterians affirm the importance of access to medical care. Rates of infant and maternal mortality and morbidity remain high in rural areas because of the lack of access to adequate medical care. The practice of women serving as medical caregivers for the family and community, often without proper protection (especially in situations involving HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and other contagious diseases), and the time that women spend caring for the sick can prevent women from pursuing education or developing other marketable skills. Increasing access to trained medical care in rural areas can increase the opportunities for women and girls to live healthy lives. The training of rural women as medical care providers can help to ensure that women are paid adequately for the care they provide.

Housing, land and property

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and our partners recognize that displacement owing to violence and forced evictions, with no relocation assistance or compensation for seized lands, disproportionately hurts women, who often lack the required documentation to demonstrate land ownership. A lack of the required property documentation of land ownership can further contribute to violations of existing housing rights; a lack of affordable housing and a lack of access to farming and fishing land continue to keep rural women impoverished at rates far greater than those of their urban or male counterparts.

Violence against women

Presbyterians have consistently called for the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault. Women around the world report a high level of impunity for acts of gender-based violence. Isolation and poverty make women and girls in rural areas especially vulnerable to such violence. Presbyterians have committed significant resources to education, advocacy and support with a view to preventing gender-based violence, and to initiatives that encourage healing and recovery.

Recommendations

Based on the experiences of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its international partners, including members of the World Communion of Reformed

Churches, in addressing the aforementioned issues, the Presbyterian Church (USA) offers the following recommendations.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages Member States to increase gender equality for all women and consult women on the ground with a view to gaining local expertise when attempting to solve the problems that women face. The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages Member States to take action to increase women's access to education, medical care, housing, land and property, and to support and create programmes for government development assistance that is gender-based. The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages the United Nations to monitor and report on issues of violence against women and to hold Member States accountable for diminishing the rights of women.

Member States should provide adequate funding for training programmes in support of women's projects, including small-scale farming projects, cooperatives and other businesses.

Cultivating crops for self-sustenance and forming small-scale farming cooperatives have helped women and their communities to address the crucial questions related to food security. Member States should develop and implement policies that will strengthen small-scale farmers. Government protection of small farms and a legal environment that supports those farms and cooperatives will help to increase food security and improve the lives of women in rural areas.

Access to basic human rights such as food and education should not depend on a person's gender or where in their State they were born. Action by Member States to improve the educational opportunities and environments for women and girls, especially in rural areas, will promote a stronger global economy.

Member States should create legal and economic structures that allow individuals to engage in microbusiness enterprises to generate income. Member States should help women to share their knowledge and skills through educational workshops and courses. Member States should allow food policy to be based on local, democratic control, recognizing that local solutions are often the most effective for local problems.

Access to health care and supportive services should be available for all people everywhere, not just for those who live in urban areas. Member States should work to ensure access to medical care for all their citizens. Member States should support programmes that provide care for the sick (in particular those affected by HIV/AIDS) and assist and support victims of domestic violence and abuse, especially in rural areas.

Conclusion

All people should have access to basic life-giving rights, such as nutritious food, housing and education. Women and girls advocate for these rights with their Governments and provide services, such as collecting food, clothing and other basic necessities to help in extending these rights to others. Member States should focus their efforts on matching the efforts of women and girls, especially those living in rural areas.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/21

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
30 November 2011

Original: English

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Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
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Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61295 (E) 131211

Please recycle

Statement

The priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", is critically important and needs to be addressed in all phases of a woman's life cycle. Today's changing world, with increases in ageing populations, a scarcity of workers and changing climates, present new challenges to rural women who are disproportionately illiterate and caught in the widening gap of "the feminization of poverty". Their vital contributions to family, community and country often go unrecognized and unrewarded.

Rural women's empowerment must be consistent and constant throughout the life cycle. Beginning in utero, the girl child's life must be protected and respected and not destroyed by sex-selective abortion. This earliest and deadliest form of discrimination is the ultimate destroyer of women. Female infanticide adds to this unacceptable disregard for the lives and value of girls. In *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, author Mara Hvistendahl puts the number of missing girls in Asia at 163 million, more than the entire female population of the United States of America.

As the girl child ages, this attitude of utter disregard for her life results in deprivation of nutritious food and poor access to health care and education. This then extends into adulthood, when rural women are often denied credit, inheritance rights and land ownership as they labour in the fields using outdated farming equipment and methods. Frequently, rural women are unpaid workers on family farms and receive no economic protection or security.

Empowering rural women reduces poverty and improves the lives of millions of women, children and men caught in the cycle of hunger and poverty. Empowering women with innovations for farming and food storage and preparation reduces the burdens on young girls who can be freed from chores to attend school.

As women experience life's milestones of pregnancy and childbirth they should not have to deny their feminine nature, be made to feel second class to men, or be penalized for their unique procreative capacity. During the reproductive years, rural women deserve policies and programmes to help them and their children to survive and thrive. The dignity of motherhood needs to be affirmed and assisted so women can be empowered as they assume the essential task of child-rearing and caregiving with assistance from rural fathers.

From care for children in their wombs, care for newborns, care for children, care of husbands, care of the sick, care of the disabled and care of the elderly, women commit themselves to the very survival of others. This critical work is often not valued for its innate worth and contribution to affirming the dignity of each human person. As they age, women continue to contribute to the family's needs as grandmothers in multigenerational households with no official payment for their vital work. Rural women's contributions both in the household and in the field to eradicate hunger and contribute to development are essential and deserving of support and recognition.

In order for rural women to experience authentic empowerment, the following must be provided:

(a) Protection from abuse, violence and exploitation

The lives of rural women and girls are empowered when women's human dignity is affirmed by measures that protect them from sexual exploitation and violence. Girls should not fear sexual assault while collecting firewood or walking to school. Laws that prevent trafficking in women for sexual exploitation or forced labour need to be enacted and enforced. Elderly women need protection from abuse.

(b) Access to education and literacy

Education and the ability to read and write are key to rural women obtaining the knowledge and skills needed to advance their status. Societies benefit when girls receive an education and improve their lives and economic livelihoods. Pregnant girls must be allowed to receive an education. Education needs to be available to all girls and women to reduce the unacceptably high female illiteracy rate. Education not only empowers women with reading, writing and mathematics skills but also results in the self-confidence and empowerment that help women to assume leadership roles in their communities.

(c) Access to health care

Life-affirming health care throughout the life cycle is needed not only for women's empowerment but also to save their lives. Rural women need transportation to health clinics during childbirth to ensure delivery with a skilled birth attendant who is able to recognize the signs of obstructed childbirth and prevent fistulas. Rural women need access to clean blood, antibiotics, treatment for life-threatening disorders and the prevention and treatment of disease. Initiatives that seek to deny or destroy the inherent procreative ability of women do not advance or empower women. Rather, programmes that include access to abortion treat women's unique capabilities as a problem rather than recognizing the universally valued role of women as the bearers of a country's future, its children. Health care in any form, including maternal and reproductive health, that includes access to abortion is not health care. Abortion ends the life of one patient and may injure the other physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. True rights and freedoms for women will never exist until women's reproductive capacity is valued and their children are cherished by the men who father them.

(d) Access to employment, job training and microcredit

Opportunities for training and job skills help rural women to improve their lives and rise from poverty. Microcredit loans provide rural women with the means necessary for starting small businesses to earn money to help the family. Such a woman receives respect from others in the community who look to her for leadership, resulting in decision-making and political involvement. Employment practices that discriminate against pregnant women must end and pregnant women must not be threatened with job loss. Women must be allowed to fulfil their innate capacity to bear and care for children without penalty. Rural women need to be able to own and inherit land.

(e) Access to resources and technology

Rural women need access to basic resources for daily life, including clean water, sanitation, nutritious food, housing and a clean cooking source. The use of cookstoves to reduce exposure to unhealthy cooking practices improves the lives of women and girls and frees them from the long hours of food preparation and the burdensome and often dangerous task of gathering firewood. Community wells provide precious water and free women from long daily walks to collect water. Sanitation improves the lives of women, respects their dignity and provides security for daily needs while reducing the spread of contaminants and disease. Modern farming techniques and access to seeds improve the lives of rural women and help in the production of a more reliable and abundant crop.

Conclusion

Poverty and hunger eradication and moves towards authentic and sustainable development can make great progress by first recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of rural women's contributions to the production of food crops and the care they render to the multigenerational family and greater community.

Rural women should be valued and their lives respected throughout the life cycle. Cultural practices that devalue the life of the girl child and women must be stopped. Rural women should be assisted in the critical role of mother and provided with opportunities for education and employment that affirm and allow for their unique and natural capacity to bear and raise children. Emergency obstetric care and access to health care should be provided with a view to reducing maternal deaths among rural women. When women and girls have access to education, it is not only their lives that improve, but the lives of their children and community. Education provides the most effective path out of poverty. Women who receive educational opportunities are healthier and their children are healthier. Educated women have healthier pregnancies and safer deliveries, resulting in healthier newborns and in reductions in both maternal and child mortality. Progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals can be made by improving the lives of rural women.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/22

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
30 November 2011

Original: English

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Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
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Statement submitted by Solar Cookers International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61316 (E) 091211

Please recycle

Statement

Solar Cookers International would be honoured to participate in the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, as solar cooking and Solar Plus Solutions are a critical component to the empowerment of rural women, the eradication of poverty and hunger, and peace and development.

Cooking is fundamental to the lives of all people, and half of the world's population cooks over open fires. It is a daily task, repeated several times throughout the day, done mainly by women with children, especially girls, assisting.

Solar Plus Solutions includes a solar cooker, a heat retention basket and a fuel-efficient stove. When the sun is out, a solar cooker ought to be used. For the days when the weather does not permit solar cooking or when it is dark, a fuel-efficient stove is used. The heat retention basket increases the benefit of each of these and should be used with both.

The benefits of solar cooking and Solar Plus Solutions to women in particular include the following:

- The elimination of smoke, especially indoors, decreases the devastating health effects caused by smoke inhalation; the smoke inhaled from these fires is a leading cause of death and illness to both women and children.
- Cooking with the sun empowers women by alleviating the burdensome task of making and tending an open fire.
- Saving money from purchasing fuel (which can be as high as 30 per cent of total income) allows families to have more income to spend in other areas, invest in small businesses, send children to school or take care of medical needs.
- Cooking with the sun increases women's purchasing power and creates an economic place for women in society.
- In rural areas, people are no longer required to spend many hours and walk great distances in search of the fuel required to create open fires.
- Women and young children, mainly young girls, no longer risk attack, rape or worse, as they do each time they leave their villages to search for firewood.
- Fuel costs are lower, as the greater the distance travelled to obtain fuel, the more difficult it is to obtain and the higher the cost due to transit expenses.
- Fuel scarcity, which leads to conflict, creating a volatile and disruptive environment (or worse) for men, women and children in rural areas, is lessened.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/23

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

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Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61309 (E) 161211

Please recycle

Statement

With a name like "Soroptimist" it should not be surprising that we, who are representing 90,000 women and girls in 124 countries, are hopeful; hopeful that we truly are on the precipice of a global paradigm shift. The world is waking to the realization that sustainable development must be the cornerstone of international policy setting, and that genuine sustainable development means economic and ecological equality. Soroptimist International, as a global voice for women, calls upon civil society, Governments and the private sector to ensure that this paradigm shift becomes a reality, and not just another point on the ever-growing list of unrealized international commitments.

With so many international meetings, policy-setting forums and conferences focusing on preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), we must vigilantly and steadfastly ensure that the role of women and girls, above all rural women and girls, is at the heart of these debates and decisions.

> Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development (principle 20 of the 1992 Rio Declaration).
>
> Women now represent 40 per cent of the global labour force, 43 per cent of the world's agricultural labour force, and more than half the world's university students. Productivity will be raised if their skills and talents are used more fully. For example, if women farmers were to have the same access as men to fertilizers and other inputs, maize yields would increase by almost one sixth in Malawi and Ghana and barriers that discriminate against women working in certain sectors or occupations would be eliminated (statement made at the Open Forum on Gender during the 2011 Policy Forum at the annual World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings, reported by the representative of Soroptimist International).
>
> Investing in small-scale farming, particularly through women, is a vital step towards meeting the challenges of food production in the future. Governments are not living up to their international commitment to protect women from discrimination, as the gap between de jure and de facto discrimination persists. Rural women still find it more difficult to get access to a range of resources such as credit, land, agricultural inputs and extensions, with obvious consequences for their food security. Land ownership is a particular issue for women (excerpt from statement given on International Women's Day at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2011, by a representative of Soroptimist International).

Soroptimist International demands that Governments commit to the education, empowerment and enabling of those most affected by ecological and economic degradation and destruction, namely, rural women and girls, to meaningfully participate in decision-making and policy-setting for the achievement of sustainable development at local, national and international levels. The Soroptimist International model of educating women and girls by increasing access to skills, empowering women and girls with increased confidence and enabling opportunities in the wider community to ensure they have choices has proven to be most effective in the context of rural women's needs and sustainable development.

With this in mind, Soroptimist International brings the following recommendations to the participants of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, based on first-hand knowledge and experience from our worldwide network of grass-roots, community-based clubs in both the global North and the global South. These recommendations are grouped into three categories. First, we provide our recommendations based on our work in action, advocacy and awareness-raising to empower rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. Second, we note with interest that many of the recommendations that we made for the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, in the context of access to education, are still relevant in the context of rural women. We have reiterated these recommendations specifically towards rural women. Finally, we have included relevant excerpts from the Women's Major Stakeholder Group for the Earth Summit 2012 (Rio+20), in which Soroptimist International is an active participant. These recommendations are critical to this year's priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women, and we believe they warrant attention.

Soroptimist International urges Governments, civil society, the private sector and other relevant partners to:

- Recognize the increasingly important role of women as the primary producers and purchasers of food, and the heretofore lack of adequate protection and support of their rights.
- By the year 2022, implement domestic legislation and policies that will ensure the full realization of the commitments made in Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration, including the establishment and funding of appropriate audit mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency.
- Ensure that actions taken to empower rural women are systems-based and horizontal, rather than project-based and vertical.
- End any and all approaches, activities or policies that promulgate the victim/saviour dichotomy and ensure meaningful, respectful and human rights-based approaches to empowerment for rural women and girls.
- Recognize that macroeconomic policies originating from an antiquated and inherently patriarchal hierarchy tend to discriminate against or ignore the gender-specific needs of women and girls. Development and implementation of appropriate microeconomic policies and programmes, in consultation with those affected, must be acted upon to ensure the protection and the realization of the human rights of rural women and girls.
- Implement with urgency policies and programmes that provide rural women and girls with security in the following areas: financial security, employment security, land security, food security, freedom from violence, secure access to education and training, and a secure place in decision-making forums.
- Encourage more female leadership in international organizations pertaining to food and agriculture through mentoring opportunities and training. The Soroptimist International representative to FAO noted with concern that there were no female candidates this year for the Director General elections. Soroptimist International notes with appreciation that the current Executive Director of the World Food Programme is a woman.

Soroptimist International recalls the following relevant recommendations made to the Commission at its fifty-fifth session, placed in the context of the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session:

- Ensure that policies and programmes take a life-course approach to education and employment for rural women and girls, recognizing and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages and that women and girls living in rural areas have different needs at different times in their lives.
- Improve and prioritize appropriately disaggregated and internationally comparable data collection, encompassing process and outcome indicators, which shift away from purely economic factors, such as gross domestic product, to holistically examine development. A Soroptimist representative in Geneva noted, after the 2011 Economic and Social Council annual meeting, that there is growing criticism of the focus on the Group of 20, which is not a United Nations-based organization, nor does it address issues outside of finance.
- Work with local partners to improve facilities so that women and girls living in rural areas are afforded education that is accessible, acceptable, available and of good quality; this includes gender-appropriate and -sensitive sanitation facilities, safe environments, dormitories for girls and other aspects, as required.
- Take a human rights-based approach to sustainable development, bringing particular attention and focus to the participation of women and girls in decision-making and policy-setting in a broad range of settings, including both the public and private spheres.
- Ensure that traditionally female-dominated work in agriculture, farming and food production is not undervalued or restricted to informal economies.
- Approach sex- or gender-based quotas with careful planning and ensure that rural women, from an early age, are fully equipped with all of the knowledge and skills necessary to take on leadership roles for which there may be allocations or other similar mechanisms. Otherwise, we are creating a system that inadvertently sets rural women up to fail, reinforcing sexist perspectives.

Women's Major Stakeholder Group recommendations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20):

- Commit to gender-sensitive development of binding international and national measures for both sustainable and equitable economies and governance of sustainable development.
- Commit to targets and indicators for women's involvement.
- Include gender equality in the sustainable development goals.
- Address the following emerging issues:
  - Food security and food sovereignty
  - Women's land rights and ownership tenure, and prevention of land-grabbing
  - Privatization and commodification of commons

- Clean renewable energies
- Women and migration
- Water burdens for women
- Health risks to women and girls posed by new technologies and development.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/24

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
30 November 2011

Original: English

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Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
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Statement submitted by Salvation Army, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61374 (E) 121211

Please recycle

Statement

The Salvation Army, an international movement and evangelical branch of the universal Christian Church, believes that all people are made in the image of God and that each person, in the eyes of God, has worth and dignity.

The Salvation Army was founded within poor communities. It identifies with and includes the poor, seeking to meet physical, material, emotional and spiritual needs. However, the Salvation Army recognizes it is society's responsibility to ensure that everyone has access to adequate resources, services and opportunities. It is necessary to safeguard the basic human rights to food, health care, shelter and clothing, as well as the rights to economic initiative, productive work, just wages and decent working conditions.

The Salvation Army has, from its inception, applied biblical principles to the social issues presented by humanity and society and to a subsequent response to these issues, and this continues to be our work.

The Salvation Army recognizes that poverty can never be completely eradicated but acknowledges its Christian responsibility to the powerless and those suffering from economic hardship.

The Salvation Army is committed to the alleviation of poverty through humanitarian aid and long-term development in those parts of the world in which it is present.

It acknowledges its responsibilities towards others and is committed to addressing the needs of people living in poverty and to speak out for the needs of the poor when Government and corporate policies could cause greater poverty, also recognizing and encouraging positive initiatives made in response to the issues.

We, the Salvation Army, welcome the 17-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations.

In 2008, the agreed conclusions from the fifty-second session reaffirmed the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including section L, whereby Governments committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, publicly acknowledged that the advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls, and highlighted the importance of policies and strategies to improve the situation of those in rural areas. They also reiterated that eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world and stressed that the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals require investing adequate resources for gender equality and empowerment.

The fifty-sixth session offers the opportunity for Member States to evaluate and implement the agreed conclusions from the fifty-second session and to examine the empowerment of rural women and their role in the eradication of poverty and hunger.

We are reminded that after 17 years of national policies and international agreements to advance the rights of women, the goals of the Beijing Platform and the Millennium Development Goals still remain unachieved.

Education and work

Education is a basic human right. In many countries, girls drop out of school and become pregnant and then rely on their boyfriends for their daily needs but they themselves are uneducated and the cycle of poverty continues.

In many of the countries within which the Salvation Army operates, reports have come back that the rate of illiteracy continues to climb, especially among the women and girls in rural and village areas.

In order for women and girls to achieve a higher standard of living and to break the poverty cycle there have to be opportunities and motivation for girls to achieve acceptable levels of formal education.

Women and girls, especially those from rural communities, need educational opportunities so that they can take their place alongside women in urban settings.

The Salvation Army has found in our work in rural communities that many of the young women who drop out of school enrol themselves in centres to learn tailoring, hairdressing and other vocational skills when given the opportunity.

Job skill training for many rural women has proven to be effective, especially when they are allowed to enrol in a vocational centre to learn a trade that would not only benefit them as a person but would also benefit their family and in many cases their community.

For example, one Salvation Army programme has made a way for women to learn the trade of making soap, soap powder and pomade in order to give the women a source of income and independence.

The Salvation Army has also made it possible for women living in rural areas to take part in small-scale business by engaging in microfinance projects sponsored by the Salvation Army.

For example, the Salvation Army has worked with rural women in providing solar cookers and teaching them how to prepare meals and to boil water in amber glass bottles. Women are learning how to use the sun for making cakes and cooking different kinds of foods in these solar cookers.

This has multiple outcomes: the reduction of firewood use, the protection of the environment and the use of a safe renewable energy source. It provides an opportunity for learning, sharing and community engagement through the preparation of food.

Recommendations for the United Nations and Member States

We urge that Governments increase opportunities for rural women to be recognized and empowered.

We urge that rural women be trained through appropriate skills training programmes that would benefit them and their family and community, such as, but not limited to, microfinance and vocational training.

We urge that Governments ensure that rural women be given the same opportunity for education that women in urban settings receive.

We applaud initiatives by the United Nations and Member States that develop women's skills through development programmes.

We urge that Governments and the United Nations collaborate and work with faith-based organizations that are already working with rural women to achieve substantive outcomes.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/25

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
30 November 2011

Original: English

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Statement submitted by United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61400 (E) 161211

Please recycle

Statement

The United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries is a global mission agency that has 11 million members, 800,000 of whom are directly involved in justice for women through the Women's Division, which supports programmes related to women, children and youth in more than 100 countries around the world. Staff in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean work with grass-roots women in leadership development, education, income generation and gender equality. Their work with rural women contributes to our understanding of current needs and realities.

We affirm the promotion of gender equality and justice from a human rights perspective.

We welcome discussion of the needs and rights of rural women around the world. Rural women in all regions cite lack of access to critical resources, including health care, education, transportation, rural economic development, personal security and other concerns. These access issues must be understood within the larger context of systemic global trends.

Macroeconomic policy

Unfair economic, trade and finance policies have led to the privatization of the public sector, a shift from small- to large-scale agriculture, a focus on agricultural exports over food sovereignty, a focus on debt repayment over domestic needs, emphasis on resource exploitation over environmental protection, and a focus on free trade over the protection of key natural resources and local markets. These policies, promoted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations, have led to a concentration of land in corporate hands with a focus on exports. The results have been massive displacement and the loss of livelihoods for small farmers.

Climate change

The failure of nations, particularly developed nations, to address their fossil fuel consumption has devastating consequences, particularly for rural women. Increases in the price of oil drive up the costs of agricultural production. The drive for "alternative fuels" shifts agriculture from food to biofuels. Both factors drive up the cost of food for millions and lead to increased hunger and poverty. An intensification of climate change due to fossil fuel consumption is leading to dramatic rural dislocation as a result of floods, drought, hurricanes, tornadoes and other extreme weather, undermining rural economies. Women and girls who stay in rural communities must travel farther for necessities such as water, which places them at greater risk of violence and increases their work.

War

Conflict, including intense resource wars for the domination of agricultural lands, water and fossil fuels, has caused massive dislocation for women in rural communities, intensified by abuse and violence against women.

Invisible labour

Women's and girls' production is often intended for consumption in the home. Since this work is unpaid, the illusion that only men provide for the family and that they are more important or superior persists. When economic development opportunities favour men's resources (such as formal employment and property) as eligibility criteria, women are left out and their role in economic development is undermined.

When women find paid work, it is often insecure and unregulated, and they are paid less than men for the same work. Free-market economics encourages production where resources, environments and labour can be exploited without direct consequences for the companies; this creates cycles of poverty, with an unsustainable strain on women and their environment.

Migration, often due to climate change or lack of opportunities in rural communities, creates situations in which women hired in service industries are vulnerable to exploitation. Trafficking for exploitative labour or sexual slavery is a global problem. Also, male migration out of rural communities often leaves women in such communities with the additional burden of caring for the sick and elderly; this caregiving is another form of women's and girls' unpaid work and has a large impact on women in communities weakened by widespread HIV/AIDS.

Lack of infrastructure

Inadequate roads, electricity and communications technology severely limit rural women's mobility, create isolation and have an impact on their options in terms of health care, education, and employment. This is a direct result of decades of privatization measures that have dismantled State public services, as well as structural adjustment policies that have cut public-sector spending on services and infrastructure.

Violence against women

Property-grabbing, wife inheritance, sexual violence and domestic violence undermine women's economic development and security. Owing to a lack of infrastructure, rural women may have even less access to mechanisms of safety and justice. States have the obligation to protect through international human rights law. Frequently, nations offer only superficial commitments to women's needs and rights, doing little to fulfil those commitments. Women's ministries in many countries have limited scope and limited power, which allows States to minimize their commitment to women's equality.

Intersections of identities

Rural women are diverse and face different challenges, depending on their environments and their social status. Women's race, ethnicity, class, national origin, national status, religion, age, marital status and sexual orientation are all significant factors in their ability to enjoy their human rights. For example, indigenous rural women face even greater challenges, since they are often marginalized because of their race or ethnicity (see General Assembly resolution S-23/3, annex, para. 5).

Any efforts to address the immediate concerns of rural women must challenge the unjust macroeconomic policies that have systematically undermined the

livelihoods, food security, access to services, and autonomy of rural women. Efforts must challenge current patterns of consumption that exacerbate climate change and resource wars. Rural women face immediate challenges that must be addressed, yet efforts to meet these challenges are extremely limited in the absence of concerted efforts to address systemic concerns.

Recommendations

We urge Member States to:

- Critically examine "structural adjustment programmes", poverty reduction strategy papers or other, similar measures that undermine the public sector and basic social services;
- Encourage International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization programmes to prioritize food sovereignty, particularly food grown by women small-scale farmers, over agro-exports and debt repayments;
- Increase the availability and accessibility of fundamental social services, including education, health care, transportation, public-sector jobs and other key public services;
- Address environmental degradation and climate change, particularly through clear commitments on the part of industrialized nations to limiting greenhouse gas emissions and to providing adaptation funding for developing nations at the seventeenth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. We call on our own Government to make binding commitments to codifying reductions of greenhouse gas emissions that reduce atmospheric levels of such emissions to below 350 parts per million, and promoting international dialogue and the development of human rights frameworks and procedures that address the challenges that are expected to emerge as climate change permanently displaces large numbers of people and entire nations;
- Engage women as peacemakers (see Security Council resolution 1325 (2000));
- Protect small-scale farms and cooperatives, and create access to finance for women farmers for the improvement of agriculture and better nutrition;
- Make sure that all economic, trade, finance, development and social policies not only are gender-sensitive, but also address the full diversity of women's lives, particularly regarding race or ethnicity, class, national status, religion, age, marital status and sexual orientation;
- In fulfilment of the commitment set out in the Beijing Platform for Action, national accounts should measure women's unpaid work. This work should be factored into the real costs of production (see A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1, para. 68 (b));
- Development policies require gender-sensitive investment in rural areas through education, credits, training, increased access to markets, and non-farm employment opportunities. Governments should increase women's and girls' access to education, right to own land, right to obtain loans, right to market goods, ability to transport goods, and ability to gain access to agricultural training.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/26

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
30 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by United States Federation for Middle East Peace, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61425 (E) 151211

Please recycle

Statement

Rural women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations

Bearing in mind that the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women is "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", the United States Federation for Middle East Peace has submitted the following statement to the Commission.

The United States Federation for Middle East Peace advocates the empowerment of women and believes that the valuable role that rural women and girls play in the economic survival of their families must not be undermined. They are an indispensable element of improving food security in their communities and their nations. Many rural women and girls are already living in poverty, and when war befalls their homelands they face double the burden and setbacks. These women and girls have the potential to contribute to the creation of sustainable development, and their voices must be heard and their needs addressed.

The Federation stresses that the gender gap must be closed when it comes to agriculture. Solidarity must be achieved through ongoing dialogue between Governments, civil society and indigenous communities to forge a relationship at all levels of the decision-making process. The international community must take into account the inequalities that rural women and girls face daily, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations. At the national level, countries should ensure that laws are enacted and implemented for the full enjoyment of all human rights by women in full equality, which is a fundamental objective set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In this context, we recommend the following:

1. Address the protection needs of all women and girls who are subjected to gender-based violence by emphasizing the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), particularly in areas that are experiencing the "Arab awakening".

2. Reaffirm the involvement of women and girls in rural areas in the Middle East, during and after conflict, in accordance with Security Council resolution 1820 (2008), thus creating a new culture that ensures gender, ethnic and intergenerational equality, with a focus on the right of women to own land and to have access to resources.

3. Ensure that education and training are accessible to indigenous women and girls. Having continuing access to resources will enable them to expand their knowledge base, thus minimizing dependency.

The world must see the correlation between granting equality to women and girls as a tool for eradicating poverty and creating a peaceful and sustainable world.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/27

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61438 (E) 131211

Please recycle

Statement

On the occasion of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom takes this opportunity to express our continued support for the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the conclusions agreed upon at the fifty-fifth session. For nearly a century, the League has concentrated on the links between gender inequality, socio-economic injustice and the root causes of war. Following the fifty-fifth session, women from around the world convened for the League's International Congress in San José (30 July-6 August 2011) to reaffirm our position and refocus on work to prevent conflict and insecurity through the advancement of the rights of all.

In the light of the priority theme for the fifty-sixth session, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", the League draws attention to cross-cutting issues: participation, land rights and access, indigenous rights, natural resources, food security, and the particular challenges and impacts of disasters, conflict and insecurity on the lives of rural women.

Rural women are often subject to particular rights violations, exclusion, isolation and poverty, and are acutely affected by natural and man-made disasters, including economic crises, climate change, militarization and conflict. To draw attention to some common themes, the League will highlight cases from our national Sections that exemplify the complexity and range of challenges facing rural women.

The League continuously emphasizes the participation of women at all stages and levels of decision-making as essential for the achievement of better standards of living, the eradication of poverty, the promotion of democracy, the pursuit of sustainable development and just peace. Despite this, women, particularly rural women, continue to be excluded from local government and are rarely represented at the national or international level. Furthermore, the misrepresentation of women's political concerns exacerbates the particular economic and social challenges that they face.

The Pakistan Section of the League emphasizes that the empowerment of rural women is essential to facilitating real participation. We recall the recommendations made at the annual conference of the Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy held in Islamabad on World Rural Women's Day, with more than 800 participants, mostly rural women from all over Pakistan. The recommendations called for the representation of rural women at all levels of decision-making, including within village union councils and district peace committees; a new line item to be added to all district annual budgets; and an implementation mechanism for the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law. Here, the League stresses that women should not be seen only as victims, but rather as agents for change in their communities.

Rural women have long suffered the negative impacts of globalization, liberalization and privatization. Women are discriminated against and excluded by policy regarding the ownership and use of natural resources, including land, water, food and mining goods. The India Section advocates that, before the State acquires land from farmers, women be consulted and the exchange not be considered legal until the consent of women is granted. Currently, Indian farmers, especially female farmers, are coerced into giving up their land, then forced to move to urban areas

where they join the unskilled workforce, which often culminates in a significant decline in their standard of living due to lack of access to education, health care and decent wages.

For farmers who remain in rural communities, the environment becomes polluted and farming becomes a greater challenge. The stripping of natural resources causes severe degradation of the environment, in turn making agricultural land more susceptible to flash flooding, erosion and even drought. These effects on rural communities, especially women, who bear much of the burden of work in rural areas, are devastating, taking an unimaginable economic, social and cultural toll on rural communities. Similarly, environmental degradation and its incapacitating effects on sustainability and community health are caused and exacerbated by conflict, the military-industrial complex, and arms production and consumption, as well as by the dangerous use and lasting effects of depleted uranium, the remnants of war and unsustainable mining.

The Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Sections, like the India Section, underline the importance of protecting our natural resources and food security. Agriculture remains the main source of employment and basis for survival of rural women. In fact, the majority of farmers worldwide are women, yet these women fail to receive equal access to technologies, training, credit, land and support. Empowering rural women with regard to food security may substantially affect the available food supply in coming decades.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, natural resources and food supply are severely negatively affected by ongoing insecurity and conflict, which has resulted in the forced displacement of communities to camps where they become dependent on insufficient food aid. In addition, where natural resources, including water and land, become less readily available owing to natural or non-natural causes, the potential for recurring and protracted violence increases. Furthermore, rural women are at a heightened risk of experiencing attacks, including sexual violence, when they must leave displacement camps or communities to farm their lands. The League emphasizes the importance of ensuring the protection of rural women, their access to natural resources and their ability to farm safely. The Sections of the League demand that women and men have fair and equal access to all natural, economic and political resources, that women are included in programmes and processes, and that they are consulted on how to protect and conserve those resources.

The Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico Sections specifically highlight the historical and ongoing exclusion of indigenous women, which has seen them forced to inhabit remote regions, with extremely limited access to resources and services. These communities continue to suffer extreme economic and social marginalization and lack of access to basic human rights enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We call on all Government, civil society and private sector actors to reverse the marginalization of rural indigenous peoples, particularly rural women, and to ensure that these communities are granted equal access to basic rights and services as members of society.

These examples have showcased the broad range of challenges facing rural women, challenges exacerbated by violence and conflict as experienced by members of the League around the world, including in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of

the Congo and Colombia. In conflict-affected rural communities, while men engage in war, women sustain families, manage the economy, provide food, and take care of all matters private and public. Right now, our sisters in many places, such as Yemen and the Syrian Arab Republic, are suffering and struggling to keep their families alive amid brutal violence. The League strongly condemns all forms of violence and calls for an immediate end to the oppressive use of force wherever and whenever it takes place. In addition, we call on Governments and relevant actors to ensure that all women receive adequate protection from and reparation for acts of violence.

In all societies, the proliferation of weapons continues to facilitate the commission of grave crimes and human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence. In addition to the impact of weapons, there are direct and indirect links between excessive military expenditure, the arms trade, violent conflict, and a reduction in resources available for social, economic and rural development and gender equality. The League demands the implementation of Critical Area E of the Beijing Platform for Action, which calls for the control of excessive arms expenditure, and the Charter of the United Nations, which, in its Article 26, calls for "the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources".

We urge States and United Nations officials not only to support us with words, but also to invest in the prevention of violence, discrimination and conflict, and to challenge militarism and its negative impacts on women and communities, especially in rural areas. We call on all stakeholders to work towards effective and robust disarmament, and regulation of the arms trade, as well as appropriate control of the circulation of existing arms. In this regard, we advocate that the international arms trade treaty currently under negotiation be used not merely as a procedural authorization of arms transfers, but as a mechanism to aid in the prevention of armed conflict and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and to significantly reduce the culture and economy of militarism.

In addition to the Beijing Platform for Action, the League demands the full implementation of obligations to protect women's human rights and promote the participation of women and gender equality, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in particular its article 14, on rural women, and the full implementation of all Security Council resolutions on women and peace and security.

The League reaffirms its commitment to the realization of sustainable peace based on human dignity. We look forward to working with partners around the world to dismantle the prevailing culture of militarism and to create a culture of peace in which, racism, discrimination, economic injustice, violence and all forms of oppression are absent and in which women, including rural women, are full and equal participants.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/28

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61450 (E) 161211

Please recycle

Statement

Rural women: from beneficiaries and participants to fully fledged rights holders

Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace has been intimately involved over the past decade in developing and implementing initiatives with the goal of empowering rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region and globally by building leadership capacities, contributing to advocacy for rural reforms and supporting the public and political participation of rural women at the grass-roots level. For several years, we have worked closely with our partners in that region to monitor the participation of women in social change movements and identify and monitor emerging trends affecting rural women.

Historically, rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region have suffered a host of gender biases, the most critical of which is undoubtedly the invisibility of and poor value attributed to the multitude and magnitude of rural women's work. The critical importance of rural women's care work in securing the lives and livelihoods of rural communities cannot be overemphasized, especially as rural women continue to bear the brunt of the impact of the food crisis in addition to the nefarious implications of climate change. The gender biases that rural women face are also compounded by the highly gendered access to property, assets and effective justice institutions. The vulnerability and subordination of women in rural areas is further compounded by the absence of care, infrastructure and other services, as well as by discriminatory practices against rural girls and women, especially in education and health care, and the lack of any form of social protection, including protection from violence.

However, our work over the past decade has shown that concerted and multilevel interventions carry strong and tangible potential for durable change. Indeed, working with rural women at the grass-roots level in concrete initiatives, such as supporting and nurturing the collective organization of rural women in cooperatives, production groups or community groups; enhancing leadership skills and supporting the creation of spaces for political participation; and building bridges between women's organizations, rights-based groups and rural women, have been effective in contributing to positive change for women in rural areas.

As we witness the aftermath of the Arab Spring unfold and recognize the importance of rural areas and the significant number of rural women in the Middle East/North Africa region, we note with concern that the promotion of rural women's interests, emancipation and opportunities does not seem to be high on the agenda of the newly emerging social change movement

We therefore argue that for real democracy to occur, gender justice and equality need to be at the heart of the current reform processes.

Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace calls upon new Governments in the Middle East/North Africa region to put in place concrete constitutional and legal frameworks for the enactment and implementation of laws, policies and regulations to address discrimination against rural women and reduce the gender gap, especially in the case of rural women.

Among the reforms recommended, we argue for comprehensive national policies for women's work in rural areas that contain positive, proactive measures that can be implemented to offer women employment and support to help them to lead meaningful and productive lives.

Finally, we call upon new social and state institutions to fulfil their duties with respect to women, especially rural women, and put in place accountability mechanisms that allow for direct interfacing and dialogue with rural women and their representing organizations, as well as milestones and indicators for measuring change and progress.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/29

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Zenab for Women in Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61842 (E) 221211

Please recycle

Statement

Eradicating poverty means creating an atmosphere conducive to peace and stability. In the process of wiping out poverty and hunger, Governments and non-governmental organizations in most developing countries are increasingly aware of the strategic role that agriculture plays in local economic development and poverty reduction. This is why more efforts have to be made to induce local farmers to produce more, especially women farmers. Small-scale women farmers grow 80 per cent of the world's food. To maximize their capacity as producers, we need policies that advance the full range of women's rights and ensure their access to land, seeds, water, credit and other inputs. Governments should adopt short- and long-term strategies to fight poverty, and more efforts have to be made to induce local farmers to produce more. We have to support them and build their capacity in order to increase their share in the gross national product. This can be done by scaling up projects that have proven to be successful and allowing farmers to manage more resources of arable land; produce more food to face food security challenges; enhance the formation of local farmers' trade unions and associations; and link them through their representative with Government and decision-making institutions in order to protect them against market fluctuations, keep them aware of climate change and train them to cope with its negative consequences. Green belts should be encouraged to prevent desertification and enhance environment protection measures. Governments and non-governmental organizations should sponsor locally invented intermediate agricultural implements, which are usually of low cost, and introduce their use in small farms for their positive impact on increasing production and water harvest and protecting the environment.

Collaborative efforts to put small farmers, especially women farmers, in many agrarian countries on the right track will eventually bring positive results and reduce food security challenges to a minimum. All efforts have to be made to develop infrastructure in traditional agricultural sectors in many countries to attract investments and enable farmers to benefit. Digging water wells in agricultural regions where underground water is in abundance may solve the problem of irrigation water and enable many to produce more in times of little rain.

In rural Sudan, Zenab for Women in Development has designed a programme to support local women farmers by organizing them to form their own union. Women Farmers Unite (WFU) aims to empower women farmers in the rural Al-Qadarif area of the Sudan, organizing the women from surrounding communities. The purpose of WFU is to increase the production of crops by consolidating resources, knowledge and organizational strength with the goal of increasing the productivity of small subsistence farm plots managed by women, thereby simultaneously increasing food production and decreasing malnutrition among women and children. In 2009, it began a project to introduce intermediate technology to farmers, providing them with agricultural implements and training. While traditional Sudanese agriculture is more prevalent, introducing intermediate technology would allow improvements and increased efficiency without full mechanization. Through a series of gradual steps, WFU can safely transform traditional agriculture methods into modern agriculture. By working closely with local manufacturers and artisans, farmers have greater control over their livelihood. Zenab for Women in Development managed to distribute agricultural inputs and help almost 3,000 women farmers; as a result, the farmers have witnessed a high

increase in food production since 2006, and their living conditions and annual income have significantly improved. They have gained more knowledge and skills, and we expect this to continue as families become more stable and have a permanent source of income. The project has been implemented with the help of other partners, such as Madre.

Full support should be provided for projects that empower women, such as those aimed at reducing their illiteracy rate, facilitating girls' access to education, providing support to working women in securing a permanent source of income and raising women's awareness of issues of public health, maternity and basic human rights.

Although some progress has been made in women's participation in politics, access to health services and women assuming public office, the majority of women in developing countries still strive to gain their basic rights and are still victims of social traditions and beliefs. Gender-sensitive Governmental institutions will allow women to have equal access to and control over resources. We call for the funding of local plans and policies that undertake gender issues and work for the advancement of women, especially rural women, encourage methods to increase livelihood options for the poor, especially poor women, incorporate women in the development process, facilitate their access to financial services and conduct activities to develop their talents and access to skills in business and management.

On the other hand, there needs to be a focus on water, sanitation and universal access to reproductive health, as it is integral to reducing maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity, curbing the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, empowering women and girls and building a more sustainable world for all women, men and young people.

We have to mobilize domestic resources in each country, and the international community should support the role of civil society, promoting fairer trade relations and debt cancellation, holding corporations and the private sector to account for socially responsible investment, and focusing on donor countries' efforts to put in place trade rules, which allow genuine market access for poor countries, and end trade-distorting agricultural subsidies. More efforts have to be made by the international community to articulate and effect financial policy to facilitate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/30

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-sixth session

27 February-9 March 2012

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Zonta International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61474 (E) 151211

Please recycle

Statement

The priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women is one that is particularly important in the light of the many challenges that rural women face owing to many factors, including the current combined effects of worldwide economic instability and climate change, both of which exacerbate the poverty that such women are already experiencing.

In 1995, in the Beijing Platform for Action, it was emphasized that policies to improve the circumstances of women in rural areas needed to be formulated and, most importantly, that those policies needed to be implemented. The areas of special interest at that time included rural women's access to resources such as land, credit, technology and decent employment. The need for rural women to be part of decision-making processes was noted, as was their accessibility to education and health services.

Along with the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women specifically calls for States to guarantee to protect the human rights of rural women and their equal access to land, markets, health-care facilities, training, education and decent living conditions.

Most families in developing countries rely on agriculture to sustain them. As a consequence, women in rural areas must take part in farming work while maintaining and caring for their families. Women play critical roles in the rural economy and in agricultural production, although much of their work is underreported owing to the lack of sex-disaggregated data. Much of the work they do may sometimes be considered housework when it is actually fundamental to agricultural production and development. The unpaid work of women on farms owned by the family is often underestimated as well as undervalued.

Some States that have adopted policies to bring about gender equity have failed to implement those policies. The result is that customs and cultural attitudes that perpetuate female stereotypes are allowed to go unchecked. When States do implement policies aimed at gender equity, many women are unaware of their rights, owing to a lack of education and the resulting illiteracy, and therefore do not claim those rights under the law.

In many countries, gender-based discrimination is the cause of rural women's inability to own or inherit land. Even when women are allowed to own or lease land, such land is often difficult to farm and far from points of distribution so that markets become almost inaccessible.

We believe that investment in rural women's issues through education, training, better health facilities and decent work and living conditions will reap benefits to those States that make such issues a priority.

Climate change has brought about unprecedented natural disasters and is one of the most serious challenges faced by rural women, who are already suffering due to extreme poverty. We must realize the important link between climate change and gender as well as the significant easing of and adaptation to climate change that women can help to bring about. The role of rural women as agents of change can be significant as they face the challenges of a greatly different future. They cannot, however, face those challenges if they are ill-prepared owing to a lack of education and accessibility to land, technology and decent employment. Decent employment is a means of lifting rural women up from poverty, which will only grow more desperate as agricultural pursuits become less and less likely to sustain their families.

Unfortunately, when it comes to decent employment, there is a pattern of inequality, much of which stems from cultural discrimination. Women are often given the most menial of jobs, many with poor working conditions that offer low pay and long hours. This does not lead to equality, but instead perpetuates discrimination.

Ultimately, the cultural barriers that keep rural women in poverty and prevent their empowerment can be overcome through the education of girls and women. The Millennium Development Goals include the aim that equal opportunity be given to both boys and girls. Educated girls become educated women with greater competencies, resulting in healthier families and communities.

While the preceding discussion only begins to scratch the surface of the problems facing rural women, we feel the need to bring the subject of violence against women into the dialogue. Violence against women is a consequence of inequality between the sexes. At the launch of the UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign in 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon remarked that one out of every three women was likely to be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. We know that poverty and inadequate living conditions do much to aggravate the problem of violence against women. The problem is recognized to be more pervasive in developing countries where poverty levels are extreme. Breaking the cycle of deprivation and poverty can help to speed up the eradication of violence against women.

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned points, our recommendations are that:

- In all States, it is crucial to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action in order to improve the lives of rural woman and to empower them personally and economically. At the same time, such implementation would help to reduce poverty and sustain development.
- In line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, special attention should be paid to ensure that rural women participate in all spheres of their lives, including the political aspects, especially where decision-making is concerned.
- All States should be urged to make provisions and policies that are gender-based and gender-sensitive. Education, training and awareness should be provided so that women can take full advantage of such policies and provisions. Training of Government and justice workers should not be a footnote to such polices, but an important component as well.
- The implementation of equality-based laws should be of utmost importance to all States. It is of no value to have laws that allow transgressors impunity.
- All issues of gender equality must be based on the assumption that women's rights are human rights. A human rights-based approach will allow rural women to enjoy the full range of such rights and will help to eliminate discrimination and violence against women.
- All States should make every effort to increase the accessibility of health-care facilities for rural women. The health-care facilities should include preventative care as well as palliative care.
- All States should be aware of the cost benefits of educating girls and women, which is an investment in the future and can only bring about better conditions for families, communities and countries.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/31

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives: priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by African Women's Development and Communication Network, Akina Mama Wa Afrika, Association of African Women for Research and Development, Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women and Women in Law and Development in Africa, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61600 (E) 221211

Please recycle

Statement

Statement of the African Women's Caucus at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Preamble

Recalling that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women calls on States parties to take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas, and that the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) also provides for the human rights of rural women, including the rights to development and food security,

Recalling also that African Heads of State declared 2010-2020 as the African Women's Decade, underscoring a grass-roots approach to gender equality and women's empowerment as a means of accelerating the implementation of commitments made to women's human rights,

Highlighting that, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, women in sub-Saharan Africa, responsible for 60 to 80 per cent of food production for both consumption and sale, are the backbone of the agricultural workforce,

Acknowledging that in line with Millennium Development Goals 1, 2, 3 and 7, which aim to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, ensure universal and equal access to primary education, promote gender equality and ensure environmental sustainability, most Governments have adopted policies to achieve food security and education for all,

Noting, however, that the proportion of the population of sub-Saharan Africa living on less than $1.25 a day has increased in the last three years,

Aware that rural women's contribution to poverty reduction through agriculture, health and other economies remains concealed and unaccounted for in monitoring economic performance measurement,

Concerned that the burden of HIV/AIDS, conflicts and disasters, like drought and famine, often falls disproportionately on women, weakening their resilience in terms of consumption adjustments, asset depletion, work burden and, in extreme cases, destitution,

Further concerned that high illiteracy rates among rural women, discriminatory legislation, social and cultural obstacles and inadequate leadership and management skills hinder women's freedom of choice and mobility in the socio-economic context; and, moreover, that women's exclusion from relevant decision-making processes at the community level, and within political parties, public institutions and professional organizations, has meant that the issues of most concern to women have been neglected,

Underscoring that the persistent patriarchal social norms, gender insensitive legislation and limited political will for rural women's empowerment relegate them to high levels of discrimination and vulnerability to food insecurity, disease and violation of their human rights,

We hereby call on:

African leaders and Governments to:

- Embrace full equality of opportunity between women and men, in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, as a fundamental principle for eliminating the prevailing disparities between them
- Comply with the obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa to promote and protect the human rights of rural women
- Include in reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights measures taken to advance rural women's human rights
- Review economic frameworks to quantify women's contribution and ensure gender sensitivity in all fields
- Urgently strengthen accessibility to comprehensive health care in rural areas for maternal and child health and HIV/AIDS services, and ensure protection against sexual and gender-based violence for women and girls
- Acknowledge traditional knowledge and take the lead in developing and delivering gender-sensitive agricultural education programmes, natural resource management and climate change adaptation technologies, extension services and market and trade opportunities
- Institute measures that enforce affirmative action and policies geared towards the promotion of women's participation in decision-making in agriculture, cooperatives and trade and value chains in rural areas
- Abolish the plurality of legal systems and enforce protective legislation that facilitates individual and collective women's access to physical assets, such as land, credit, occupational inputs and natural resource management
- Prioritize rural women and local communities' social security programmes with emphasis on unemployed rural women, orphans and vulnerable children, victims of disasters and other vulnerable groups

Development partners to:

- Support multilateral and bilateral trade agreements that will increase recognition of more formal jobs and improve work conditions for rural women
- Support research on rural women's development in Africa, including factors responsible for women's marginalization in economic development, to encourage policy changes based on reliable, evidence-based studies
- Support the implementation of Governments' and bilateral and financial institutions' investment policies that preserve and protect the interest of rural women and local communities and facilitate equal access to benefits sharing

Civil society organizations to:

- Monitor progress on Governments' obligations to develop gender-sensitive legislation that gives women equal access to economic opportunities
- Monitor and evaluate Governments' progress in delivering gender-sensitive allocation and expenditure on agriculture and other sectors to ensure integrated gender-responsiveness and guard against corruption
- Increase gender-sensitive research that examines factors contributing to poverty and the interrelationship between women's productive and reproductive roles
- Introduce mentorship programmes between professional women in agriculture, science and technology and rural women, for learning and advocacy
- Intensify civic education and the dissemination of laws and policies that protect and preserve human and environmental rights to rural communities and rural women and children in particular.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/32

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011
English
Original: Arabic

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Al-Hakim Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61825 (E) 081211 110112

Please recycle

Statement

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women convenes this year to discuss an extremely important topic, namely, the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.

The importance of this topic stems from the vital role played by rural women in strengthening agricultural and rural development, contributing to poverty eradication and striving to achieve the goal of food security. Rural women indeed play a major role in the rural economies of most countries; through their close relationship with the land, they carry out most of the planting, cultivation and harvesting activities in farming, which serves to indicate that women feed the whole community, in addition to performing such other tasks as looking after the home and taking care of children, the elderly and the sick.

International attention to rural women is therefore imperative, particularly considering the burdens facing them in employment and in life generally. This category of women is the one most affected by many of the problems confronting our modern-day world, including climate change, economic crisis, poverty, the spread of disease, malnutrition, illiteracy, exploitation and violence.

The challenges facing rural women, moreover, differ from those facing other categories of women. Most rural women, for instance, live far from the centres of decision-making and power in remote and sometimes isolated areas, without the available resources to own land and without transport, permanent housing, health care and protection. They are also deprived of the opportunities of education and access to modern technology.

At Al-Hakim Foundation, we firmly believe that the current session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers a great opportunity for the voice of rural women to be heard at the local, national and international levels. We take this opportunity to affirm the importance of participation by rural women in the process of discussing and taking decisions on matters relating to them, and the need to provide all forms of international support for infrastructural and community development under their leadership in order to promote advancement and empowerment. Global and national policies must also change in the interest of improving land ownership, transport, marketing, health care, credit, education and access to modern technology, which they urgently need and which will contribute to the development of millions of women. In this regard, we believe that the establishment of communication channels and partnerships between women's scientific centres and women in rural areas, together with the promotion of collective initiatives through civil-society organizations, networks and women's cooperatives, will contribute to the empowerment of women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors and at all levels. It will also lead to the strengthening of rural women and the establishment of more stable and fairer societies, as well as to achievement of the internationally agreed development goals and improvement of the quality of life for women, men, families and local communities.

With respect to the rural women of Iraq, in addition to the challenges and difficulties shared by all women the world over, they continue to suffer the consequences of the practices of the former dictatorship. Iraqi women also remain

the prime victims of terrorist activities targeted at civilians in Iraq, with the result that the number of widows has vastly increased, sounding the alarm that attention must be directed to adopting all measures and means to protect and support women in this category, preserve their dignity and empower them economically.

Al-Hakim Foundation, which is one of Iraq's largest civil-society institutions, engages in activities aimed at empowering Iraqi women, defending their rights and affording them appropriate opportunities at all levels of society. Several of its programmes have been devoted to providing economic support for rural women, particularly widows and poverty-stricken families, by way of direct material support, in kind or cash loans, or the establishment and financing of small income-generating projects for unemployed women in families with no breadwinner.

The Foundation additionally runs literacy courses in a number of Iraq's districts and subdistricts in order to educate and support rural women and enable them to realize their capacities for dialogue and building ideas.

It also regularly organizes various cultural, social and educational activities for rural women at the district and subdistrict levels, with effective participation by these women.

In order to develop professional and occupational capabilities and train rural women in modern technology, the Foundation has established vocational and scientific training courses for Iraqi rural women in order to provide them with the skills for venturing into working life with flair and self-confidence.

Through the activities of its Women's Affairs Department, Al-Hakim Foundation continues to work on strengthening Iraqi women and promoting their effective participation in public life and the political process by educating them about their rights and also by providing educational opportunities for young girls in a number of its training centres.

At the same time, the Foundation pursues its activities aimed at achieving justice for Iraqi women and fighting all forms of oppression and discrimination against them through various initiatives that it launched or adopted, including that of an Islamic day for combating violence against women, which is now an annual event involving scientific, cultural and media activities focused on stimulating the moral element of religion and bringing the religious factor to bear in the tribal context in order to end the phenomenon of violence against women. It successfully highlighted this phenomenon, which is suffered by women in all societies, and, following the involvement of many of Iraq's religious and social figures in this anti-violence initiative and inspired by the true religion of Islam, it devised a number of solutions and means for dealing with it.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/33

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by American Association of University Women, Anglican Consultative Council, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Girls Learn International, Grail, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Movement for Fraternal Union among Races and Peoples, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, League of Women Voters of the United States, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association, Passionists International, Plan International, Salesian Missions, Salvation Army, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, To Love Children Educational Foundation International, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, VIVAT International and World Union for Progressive Judaism, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61606 (E) 291211

Please recycle

Statement

Promises made

In 2008, in the agreed conclusions from its fifty-second session, the Commission on the Status of Women reaffirmed the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including section L entitled "The girl child", whereby Governments made commitments to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against girls, publicly acknowledged that the advancement of women is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls and highlighted the importance of policies and strategies to improve the situation of those in rural areas. The Commission also identified poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge facing the world and stressed that combating the growing feminization of poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and empowerment.

Equal access, for rural girls and women, to education and health services, gainful employment, decision-making and productive resources, including land, capital, credit and technology were also emphasized in the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In that document, the Assembly noted the large number of rural women working in the informal economy, with low levels of income, little job and social security and discriminatory land and inheritance rights. The Assembly called upon Governments to incorporate a gender perspective into the design, development, adoption and execution of all policies and budgetary processes to support gender equality and empowerment.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, including their Optional Protocols, are designed to protect the human rights of girls. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which focuses on rural women and girls, calls on States parties to ensure that women and girls have the same rights as men and boys.

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women offers a unique opportunity for Member States to evaluate the implementation of the agreed conclusions from the fifty-second session and examine the empowerment of rural girls and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. The Working Group on the Girl Child encourages the Commission to review progress, provide policy guidance and ensure the empowerment of all girls, including those in rural and urban areas, in order to ensure the full enjoyment of their human rights.

Promises broken

Despite decades of treaties, laws, resolutions, statements, meetings and promises, the well-being of girls still lags behind that of boys. Research indicates that girls begin life from a position of disadvantage, which continues throughout their lifespan. In addition, data in a United Nations Children's Fund report of 2011 indicate that inequalities in access to opportunities, resources and services, including education, health and protection, become significantly greater as girls approach adolescence. Research also indicates that the situation is particularly dire for girls in rural areas, who are routinely denied the resources that they need to

break the poverty cycle as a result of discriminatory cultural practices, property and inheritance laws and unequal access to technology and services. As noted by the General Assembly in 2011, for example, the rural environment is one of extreme poverty. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the 1.4 billion extremely poor (defined as those living on less than $1.25 per day), in the developing world, live in rural areas.

Data provided by the World Health Organization in 2011 indicate that the cultural preference for sons, based on prevailing beliefs that boys bring more prestige or wealth to a family than girls, has resulted in over 100 million missing girls, as a result of female feticide, infanticide, malnutrition and neglect. In addition, data from the United Nations Children's Fund, also from 2011, indicate that only 50 per cent of children under 5 living in the developing world were registered at birth, with significant differences between children in rural and urban areas. A number of empirical studies indicate that rural girls are more likely than their urban peers to manifest delayed growth and development and to show evidence of anaemia or deficiencies in iron and vitamin D. In some countries, including Ghana, Mali and Senegal, rates of anaemia among adolescent girls (aged between 15 and 19) exceed 60 per cent. Furthermore, girls face significant barriers to accessing health care.

As a consequence of prevailing gender roles and their associated obligations, commitments and expectations, many girls' educational, social and economic opportunities are hampered. Girls, for example, are often obliged to devote an unequal share of time to unpaid personal care work (caring for children, the sick or the elderly) and care-related activities (fetching water and firewood, processing and preparation of food, cleaning and washing). And despite the fact that education yields many long-term benefits, including a trend towards marriage at a later age and greater opportunities to develop job skills, numerous studies have found that girls are more likely than boys to be denied their human right to basic literacy and education, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. The situation is worse for members of ethnic or racial minorities and girls who live in poverty or in rural areas. Structural barriers in rural areas include poor electricity supply, distance (e.g., living in mountain areas with no transportation) and the danger of walking home after dark, and girls' responsibilities to help their families earn a living constitute a further impediment. In one study, it was found that girls in rural areas were less likely than their urban peers to attend secondary school (66 per cent versus 84 per cent), and that girls in rural areas were also less likely to complete secondary school compared with their male peers (43 per cent versus 58 per cent).

Some girls are forced into marriage at or before the onset of puberty, the consequences of which may include ending their education; limiting their freedom; and increasing their risk of experiencing domestic violence, adverse pregnancy outcomes and HIV infection. In the poorest regions of the world, most of which are rural, 35 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18; the figure is estimated at 45 per cent in southern central Asia, 40 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 25 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In some countries, including Bangladesh, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger, more than 60 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18. Research has documented that girls in rural areas experience higher rates of maternal mortality, obstetric fistula and violence, while their access to services, law enforcement and legal protection remains limited or non-existent.

The rural environment is also characterized by limited access to decent work, widespread unemployment, poor quality jobs, low pay, inadequate labour rights,

weak social protection and the lack of representation. In 2009, a report by the International Labour Organization found that these structural barriers were exacerbated for girls, owing to their lack of education and training, inadequate transportation and the constraints arising from unequal obligations as regards care and household responsibilities. Consequently, rural girls are employed in more precarious forms of informal employment, including domestic work, where they face numerous health risks, including abuse by both the women and men of the household. Girls in rural areas, and particularly those from ethnic minority areas, are particularly vulnerable to being recruited to work far from home, with false promises of decent and legitimate work, and subsequently being trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. At least 1.8 million children are exploited in commercial sex or pornography worldwide, the vast majority of them being girls.

Recommendations

To improve the condition of girls in rural areas, we urge Member States to:

1. **Promote a human rights-based approach to gender equality**

Support is required for the implementation of all existing commitments, most notably the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (in particular its article 14 on rural women and girls), and the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in particular section L. We strongly support the development of a joint general resolution or comment on harmful practices affecting girls to help fulfil obligations under both Conventions and ongoing monitoring on the implementation of those treaties.

2. **Support economic empowerment via equal access to economic resources**

The fulfilment of their human rights is a precondition for girls to make a successful transition into adulthood and to become empowered both economically and socially. Barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights persist in practice, including gender stereotypes, patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices within families, communities and institutions, and in law, including as regards land, property and inheritance rights, and must be removed with urgency. Legislative and administrative reforms must promote the economic empowerment of girls through policies, strategies and programmes that ensure equal access to education at all levels; physical and mental health services; employment opportunities and economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property; credit; natural resources and technology. Positive employment opportunities for girls in rural areas must be expanded.

3. **Intensify efforts to reduce poverty and economic inequality**

Combating the feminization of poverty requires investing sufficient resources for gender equality and the empowerment of girls, taking into account the diversity of needs between those in urban and rural areas. Promoting gender equality and empowerment within rural communities helps to reduce poverty, hunger, disease, environmental degradation and violence. We urge greater investment in rural development and agriculture, labour-saving technology and clean and renewable energy in rural communities.

4. Invest in quality education and training

Investment in quality education and training in rural areas, including vocational and literacy training, is a central intervention with strong multiplier effects. Comprehensive national education strategies must include long-term funding that ensures adequate infrastructure for education and prioritizes the education of girls in all development plans and poverty reduction plans.

5. Improve data collection and analysis

Effective policies and programmes for the empowerment of girls and rural development will require strengthening countries' capacity to collect and analyse data that are disaggregated by sex and age, and on the basis of rural and urban populations. Examples of good practices and lessons learned in promoting gender equality and girls' empowerment in rural areas should be compiled and shared, with a view to replicating and scaling up successes.

6. Launch public campaigns to create awareness

Public campaigns are vital in order to eliminate discrimination based on a notion of inferiority of girls, in both the public and private spheres, and to support positive attitudes and behaviours that encourage girls' full participation in all areas of life. Campaigns must make use of the media and address the active role of men and boys by establishing gender equality and emphasizing the societal benefits, for all, of empowering girls. Studies also indicate that gender biases and stereotypes are influenced by parents, school and the media and reinforced by the peer group.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/34

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by American Psychological Association, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Council of Psychologists, International Union of Psychological Science and Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61612 (E) 211211

Please recycle

Statement

Psychological perspectives on the empowerment of rural women and girls as a strategy for eradicating poverty

Government commitments and United Nations declarations, conventions and strategies over the past 25 years have increased awareness of gender discrimination and inequality suffered by women and girls, including those in rural areas (see the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the 1985 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women; the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action; the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and General Assembly resolution 64/140, on the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas). However, this has not been enough to focus Governments' development priorities and resources on empowering rural women and girls as an effective and sustainable way to eradicate poverty. The perspectives that Member States and United Nations agencies use in their efforts to eradicate poverty focus on economic indicators, and exclude the role of psychological factors in empowering women and girls. This statement highlights important contributions of psychological perspectives on empowerment to poverty reduction.

Seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion persons living in poverty worldwide are women. Rural women and girls, including those with disabilities, face unique and urgent challenges that demand attention by the Commission on the Status of Women and other United Nations bodies. This statement offers recommendations concerning the importance of psychosocial empowerment and mental health as factors, which can contribute to the reduction of poverty in this group. Psychosocial empowerment and mental health will enhance the contributions rural women and girls now make and also allow them to make even greater contributions to the eradication of poverty.

Psychological perspectives on empowering poor rural women and girls

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), empowerment is a process by which persons lacking access to material and social resources gain greater access and control over those resources and improve their life circumstances. Psychological empowerment occurs when a person is enabled to participate in decisions affecting him or her and to exercise some, even limited, control over life choices. It is generally recognized, and supported by psychological and other social science research, that empowerment is essential to progress and stability in national development. There is great cultural and environmental diversity among the communities in which rural women and girls live. These communities have much in common, but they also have unique characteristics. Rural women with disabilities are probably the most disempowered of all rural women because they face discrimination, poverty and related societal risks and are often ignored in policy planning. Therefore, empowerment efforts that target rural women and girls have to be culturally and demographically relevant to the communities they serve to be effective.

The psychosocial empowerment of rural women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities, involves three steps (see M. A. Zimmerman, *Empowerment Theory: Psychological, Organizational, and Community Levels of Analysis. Handbook of Community Psychology* (2000)). First, psychological distress must be reduced and participation in economic and social activities encouraged. Second, isolation must also be reduced by developing social relationships and networks. Finally, women's rights to participate in social and economic decision-making at all levels should be supported. The recognition that rural women have rights to ownership and participation in economic decisions is critical to their successful empowerment. A psychosocial approach to empowerment promotes rural women's and girls' recognition and development of their human rights and their strengths and provides resources and skills. Rural women, even while living in extreme poverty and suffering gender disparities and traditional role restrictions, play a critical role in family, food security and survival. They also enhance agricultural and rural development. Their vitality and resilience are protective factors to be nurtured because they provide psychological buffers helpful to avoiding and recovering from threats to their lives. Focusing on these strengths can serve as a basis for effective programmes.

Mental health and psychosocial well-being

Mental health is an essential, yet most neglected, contributor to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. According to WHO, most persons with mental or psychosocial problems, especially those in poor countries, are not able to access income-generating opportunities and education, health, mental health or other social services. This severely limits their human rights. In addition, poverty and depression are strongly related, according to psychosocial research. Women in poor rural areas suffer from high levels of psychological distress and depression and are less likely to receive help than are urban women. Isolation, poor education and job opportunities, with little access to health and mental health care, contribute further to their poverty.

Rape, early marriage, high fertility rates and chronic illness suffered by rural women may also contribute to mental health problems. Women who work are poorly paid for low-level jobs. They are also burdened at home with unpaid household and family care work. These multiple stressors, including migration of husbands to find work, interact to cause anxiety and depression and further harm women by interfering with their ability to cope, resulting in the persistence of poverty in their lives and their communities. Rural women's motivation to develop a business that could move them out of poverty, reduce social isolation and increase their ability to fend for themselves is also inhibited by lack of education and business experience. Rural life in poverty prevents women from seeking psychosocial services. Social isolation, poor education, a fear of stigma and lack of transportation and health insurance make it difficult to gain access to psychosocial care. In many rural areas there are few or no trained psychologists, social workers or other health-care workers to help women meet these challenges.

Recommendations

Governments should invest funding for rural women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities, to:

1. **Promote their psychosocial empowerment and gender equality using these strategies**:

(a) Educate them about their human rights, personal strengths, skills and resources to foster their vitality and resilience as personal protective factors that offset poverty;

(b) Engage rural women and girls as active partners in planning and operating programmes at all decision-making levels;

(c) Encourage development of ownership, optimism and confidence in their ability to be effective by providing opportunities for participating in entrepreneurial, social and other development activities;

(d) Encourage and provide opportunities for expanding and strengthening capacity-building community networks through which information and entrepreneurial skills are shared;

(e) Provide and strengthen existing primary, secondary and higher education and training of rural women and girls;

(f) Provide equal access to economic opportunities and resources such as microcredit loans.

2. **Provide human resources and facilities to promote mental health and psychosocial well-being that**:

(a) Train local women peer coaches as mental health resources for the community, using available technology such as online communication and instruction. Psychologists, social workers and other mental health professionals can serve the community by training peer coaches to recognize mental health problems and provide services or referrals;

(b) Develop and evaluate a programme that deploys trained psychologists working with peer coaches to provide services and training;

(c) Build rurally accessible multidisciplinary integrated service centres and mobile vans to provide one-stop services; embed psychosocial and mental health practitioners in primary health care; provide family and social services, literacy and continuing education and business and entrepreneurial skill training;

(d) Improve roads and provide buses so that a multidisciplinary service centre is easily accessible to all women and girls;

(e) Offer low cost insurance or government grants to provide health and mental health services in rural areas;

(f) Train health and mental health-care providers to deliver accessible, informed and non-discriminatory services and education, addressing the unique health and mental health needs of girls and women with disabilities.

3. **Ensure that interventions and aid programmes that target rural women and girls are relevant to the demographic diversity among them**:

(a) Ensure that all intervention and research and evaluation projects are implemented according to ethical principles, with respect for the human rights and dignity of all rural women and girls, and with relevance to their demographic diversity.

4. **Reduce the burden of paid and unpaid work by**:

(a) Providing access to simple tools and technologies, such as solar ovens, pump wells, electricity, indoor plumbing, cell phones and the Internet;

(b) Reducing gender stereotyping of work by educating boys and men that caring for children, the elderly and the sick is family work to be shared by all;

(c) Developing community support services for child and elder care through local government agencies, service organizations and local and international organizations.

5. **Develop a research and programme evaluation database, using a multicultural, lifespan perspective, so that the population needs and effectiveness of poverty eradication programmes, for women and girls of different ages, racial and ethnic origins, regions and disability status, can be determined.**

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/35

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Armenian Relief Society and Women's World Banking, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61668 (E) 211211

Please recycle

Statement

The Armenian Relief Society and Women's World Banking congratulate the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) on its first full year of operations and embrace its vision to meet the needs of the world's women. We applaud the States Members of the United Nations for establishing an entity solely focused on gender equality and the empowerment of women. As the Executive Director of UN-Women, Michelle Bachelet, states, "Gender equality must become a lived reality", and until this is achieved, development and peace will wane. We welcome the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". Further, we accept with enthusiasm the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges" and its review theme, "Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women".

It is well known that throughout the world women are responsible for the well-being of their families and that gender roles differ dramatically across cultures, locale (urban/rural) and even in individual households. Women have different needs than men during the course of their lifetime, and these needs may be exacerbated based on demographics. Rural women especially face great challenges owing to location and mobility that affect their basic human rights, including access to food, water and sanitation. Rural populations are less educated, have less access to health care, exhibit more chronic diseases and are more likely to be excluded from financial services. Couple a rural woman's role as caregiver with that of income-generator, and the stakes rise exponentially.

The health of families and communities, including financial health, is tied to the health of women. The illness or death of a woman has serious and far-reaching consequences for the health of her children, family and community. Creating a development equation of microfinance — including microcredit, savings and insurance — with a focus on investing in health care for rural women will produce results that will positively impact all areas of a woman's life, her family and her community.

Women's health issues have gained higher international visibility and renewed political commitment in recent decades. While targeted policies and programmes have enabled women to lead healthier lives, significant gender-based health disparities remain. Many of the modest gains in women's health realized in recent decades are now threatened or have been reversed owing to war, economic instability and HIV/AIDS. Limited access to education or employment, high illiteracy rates and increasing poverty levels are making health improvements for women exceedingly difficult. Basic health care, family planning and obstetric services are essential for women — yet they remain unavailable to millions. Gender-equitable approaches to health are needed to enable women's full participation as clients and in the planning and delivery of health services.

As the custodians of familial health, women play a critical role in maintaining the health and well-being of their communities.

- Maternal conditions are the leading causes of death and disability among women. More than 99 per cent of the estimated 536,000 maternal deaths each year occur in the developing world.

- Every year, about 10 million women endure life-threatening complications during pregnancy and childbirth, sometimes leading to long-term disability. Nearly all maternal deaths are preventable through timely prenatal and post-natal care, skilled birth attendance during delivery and the availability of emergency care to deal with complications.

- Globally, women comprise half of the adults living with HIV/AIDS — in sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion rises to 61 per cent. A woman affected by HIV/AIDS is plunged further into poverty, losing the ability to provide for herself and her children.

- International funding from public and private donors and other non-governmental organizations accounts for only 15 per cent of the expenditures on reproductive health and family planning activities in developing countries. According to the Global Health Council, the majority of spending comes from within the countries themselves, with more than half coming from consumers' pockets.

Among its core programmes as a more than century-old humanitarian organization, the Armenian Relief Society heeds women's health as the foundation for empowerment, independence and development. For more than 30 years, Women's World Banking has focused on empowering women by expanding the economic assets and participation of low-income women and their households by helping them to access financial services, knowledge and markets. By providing microloans, credit, insurance and other financial products and services, Women's World Banking has allowed women to make a decent living and support their families' needs. Yet in order to better serve women, Women's World Banking acknowledges that women live and work within cultural constraints which affect their ability to access financial services.

- Mobility constraints lead to women's involvement in predominantly home-based businesses, which are in highly competitive sectors and require limited human and investment capital. Businesses are often extensions of household activities, such as sewing, buying and selling goods, running beauty parlours and catering. While these activities have low barriers to entry, they also have limited scalability. Additionally, a lack of mobility limits the customers with whom women can do business (i.e., selling to neighbours on credit rather than receiving cash) and leaves male household members to buy and sell in the marketplace, consequently, allowing them to assume greater control over the business and its profits.

- Reaching women in rural markets presents an additional set of challenges. Research by Women's World Banking in Uganda (2009) found that women in rural areas tend to be unpaid labourers on family farms, but also engage in their own small-scale income-generating activities. However, these activities are viewed as supplemental and financial institutions often reach out to rural markets only through male-dominated agricultural cooperatives that ignore women farmers. Understanding the constraints on rural women is essential to avoid exclusion.

Health indicators, such as infant mortality rates, water sanitation and diarrhoea-related deaths, and food security improve in areas with microfinance and microcredit services. Financial inclusion and health care are complementary and must be part of a comprehensive solution to poverty. In some cases, delivering services in tandem, such as health education with credit service, increases the impact of both.

Research has shown that health-care costs exert the most financial pressure on poor families. Medical emergencies can place a huge burden on households already struggling to stay afloat. Short-term solutions, such as selling productive assets, including livestock or farming equipment, only serve as a catalyst for moving further into poverty, depriving families of the tools they once had to generate revenue.

Moreover, medical problems are compounded by the fact that the poor are less likely to seek treatment early for fear of losing income by taking time away from their families or businesses. Poor men and women alike suffer from a lack of access to health care, but the need to serve women is particularly acute: much of the insurance available is gender-neutral, precluding coverage for maternity-related health care, a predicament that can cause women to delay or forgo critical hospital visits. In April 2010, Women's World Banking helped its network member Microfund for Women (Jordan) to launch a first-of-its-kind insurance product that provides a cash benefit after hospitalization to help with the costs associated with loss of business, medical expenses and transportation. Unlike the majority of insurance products available, the caregiver benefit was designed to cover all hospital visits related to pregnancy, a feature that Women's World Banking felt was critical to include in order to improve maternal health.

The Armenian Relief Society and Women's World Banking recognize the value in programmes by UN-Women, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Health Organization, among other United Nations entities, including the Commission, that work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals for women's health and empowerment, as well as the work of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Food Programme specifically addressing rural women. We strongly encourage continued regard for rural women by the United Nations, especially because of their unique challenges. Programmes fostering financial independence and security, combining microfinance and microcredit with other social services, such as health care, are essential for poverty alleviation. The United Nations must continue to cultivate integrated and innovative solutions to poverty. Finally, we urge the States Members of the United Nations to examine their national and local policies on providing basic services and human rights to all citizens and to survey specifics on rural women.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/36

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Coalition against Trafficking in Women, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Franciscans International, Grail, International Council of Jewish Women, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, National Council of Women of the United States, Salvation Army, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries and Soroptimist International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61043 (E) 091211

Please recycle

Statement

We, non-governmental organizations working towards the realization of gender equality, urge the Commission on the Status of Women to address the issue of trafficking in women and girls from rural communities. This widespread practice is a current and growing challenge to the empowerment of rural women.

Vulnerability of rural women to trafficking

The poverty of women and girls in rural areas makes them vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers. This vulnerability, coupled with the demand for women and girls to be exploited in the sex industry and as a source of cheap labour, makes the abduction, enticement and deception of these women and girls profitable to traffickers. The rural populations in many countries are among the most impoverished, causing growing numbers of rural women and girls to be sold into prostitution or forced labour, within both rural and urban areas.

Rural women and girls are trafficked both internationally and within the borders of their own countries. They are often lured by promises of legitimate and well-compensated work away from their communities and families. Instead, they are sold into the commercial sex industry or exploited in forced labour, where women and girls are often subjected to many forms of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse and harassment.

The effect of globalization on agriculture and small-scale industries, which are the main sources of income in rural economies, has been devastating. Owing to continuing gender inequality, women continue to be discriminated against in employment. Therefore, the disappearance of jobs in local industry and family farms has disproportionately affected women. In addition, girls' education is often neglected in rural areas, negatively affecting their job prospects. The literacy rates for women in the rural areas of many countries are much lower than for women in the urban areas of those countries.

Globalization has also increased the demand for sexual exploitation, with wealthy foreigners joining local buyers seeking commercial sex. Sex tourism is an increasing problem, particularly in developing countries. Motivated by the profitability of selling sex, traffickers transport rural women and girls to tourist areas to meet the demand for prostitution. As the women and girls are separated geographically from friends and family who might be able to help them, and because they lack education and have no access to money, their prospects for escaping a life of sexual exploitation are limited.

Effects of trafficking on rural women's empowerment

Women who are enticed to migrate often do so as a way out of poverty and possibly to provide financial assistance to their families and communities of origin. Traffickers and pimps exploit women and girls seeking to improve their lives through education, employment, migration or other opportunities. Denied access to school by traffickers, girls fail to develop their economic potential, often perpetuating their exploitation into adulthood. Denied opportunities for decent work by traffickers, women are unable to improve their lives. For women to be able to participate in the development of their communities, trafficking in women and girls must be eliminated.

The negative impact of trafficking on the health and human rights of women and girls around the world is tremendous. Victims often suffer severe health consequences, including physical injuries from beatings, rapes and unwanted sex; psychological trauma; sexually transmitted diseases; and alcohol and drug abuse induced by pimps or by the victims' attempts to self-medicate. Sexual violence, which is suffered by the victims of both sex trafficking and female labour trafficking, is one of the leading factors responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Population Fund, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (now part of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)) have identified gender inequality as the core cause of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls, citing their inability to exercise control over their bodies and their lives. Women and girls suffering from these severe and long-term health problems are hindered in their ability to participate in the economic development of their communities.

Recommendations

We urge policy and action in the following areas:

- Make specific and local recommendations not only about ending particular forms of male violence but also on transforming the systemic social and economic structures, such as patriarchy and other harmful social systems, that unremittingly disadvantage women
- The elimination by Governments of economic and discriminatory factors, such as poverty, systematic violence against women and girls, gender discrimination, harmful traditional practices and other forms of discrimination, such as racism, that render rural women and girls vulnerable to trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation
- The examination and reform of economic development policies that have a disproportionately negative impact on rural populations
- The implementation on a national basis in all regions of educational curricula that promote gender equality in relationships through raising awareness of the harms of gender stereotyping, sexual exploitation and the objectification of women and girls
- Ensure equal access to education and the establishment of literacy programmes for rural women and girls
- Adequately fund and support services for the survivors of international and domestic trafficking and prostitution, including exit programmes with financial assistance, education and job training, employment opportunities, housing, health services, legal advocacy, residency permits and language training
- The promotion of effective laws against trafficking, prostitution and related forms of sexual exploitation, including provisions criminalizing the demand for trafficking and prostitution based on the principles of gender equality, such as the Nordic Model
- The rejection of governmental policies promoting prostitution, whether through the legalization or the decriminalization of the sex industry

- The rejection of the misleading term "sex work", which minimizes the abuses and exploitation of prostitution and attempts to redefine it as an ordinary job, particularly for impoverished and marginalized women

- The ratification and implementation of the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

Governments must adopt and adequately fund programmes aimed at ensuring equal access to education for rural women and girls and ending employment discrimination based upon gender. Adopting short-sighted economic development policies and normalizing industries that are not protective of dignity and human rights prevent societies from achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women. Governments must ensure that rural communities are not left impoverished and without opportunities for women as a result of globalization and shifting industrial systems. Governments must also eliminate policies that institutionalize exploitation by legally legitimizing it. The trafficking in rural women and girls into commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour must be eradicated by addressing both the poverty that makes them vulnerable and the demand that drives the industry.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/37

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Catholic Women's League Australia and Endeavour Forum, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61662 (E) 291211

Please recycle

Statement

Conditions for rural women should be improved through a reduction in their poverty, development of their abilities and empowerment. Any action should first be directed towards woman's unique role in conceiving, bearing and raising children, an obligation found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to provide "special care and assistance to motherhood". This means that all women should have access to competent obstetrical and gynaecological services, which include appropriate care of the child in the uterus and assistance to establish breastfeeding and care of the child after birth. Such assistance should address the importance of breastfeeding; the need for maternal and baby health care to avoid succumbing to a treatable disease; and protecting the health of the mother by avoiding the use of harmful steroidal contraception, abortifacients and abortion.

The importance of breastfeeding for rural women in the reduction of infant mortality must be emphasized for many reasons. Breastfeeding reduces the risk of gastro-intestinal infections in infants and, as recommended in the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on breastfeeding, should constitute the main nourishment for an infant's first six months and, if possible, should be continued for two years. Breastfeeding has the additional benefit of reducing the risk of breast cancer in mothers. A breastfed child has an increased chance of living longer. It reduces child mortality, which is very real for sub-Saharan women, who have many pregnancies because they see three or four of their children die from treatable diseases on the way to distant hospitals. By lowering the mortality rate of children, the mother would not feel the need to replace those who die. She would have more time and strength for skill development and other activities.

With the return of fertility during or following breastfeeding and the birth of a baby, a woman needs to be taught a method of family planning that will not harm the baby and will allow parents to make love without fear of conceiving another baby so soon after a birth. Such a method is the Billings Ovulation Method, which is a reliable natural, therefore entirely safe, cost-free method. It empowers women with knowledge about their bodies. In 1978, WHO found it to be 98.5 per cent effective after a five-country, cross-cultural trial and gave the name "Billings" to what was then known as "the ovulation method", to distinguish it from other natural methods, such as rhythm, calendar and temperature-taking. Since then, trials of the method in India and China have shown a consistent pattern of success, with the added bonus of the method being used to achieve pregnancy. It has recently been found to help couples labelled "low fertility" 65 per cent of the time.

It was developed by the Australian doctors, John and Evelyn Billings, in 1953 and is now being taught in over 100 countries, with copyrighted standardized materials available. Dr. E. Billings' bestselling book, *The Billings Method*, has been translated into 22 languages. In it, she describes how in Africa the older Luo, Kamba and Taita women used to conduct fertility rituals in which they imparted knowledge to young women entering adolescence about assessing their health and fertility by observing a cervical secretion just as they go about their daily activities. Thanks to the Billings doctors and with a little more instruction in four common sense guidelines, they have now developed a more accurate natural way, which is simple to learn. Instructors in Uganda report that it profoundly changes the lives of rural African women. They are finally able to space their children without feeling stressed and without the costly adverse effects of contraception. The couple is then

able to plan and acquire new skills, which will alleviate the poverty that seemed insurmountable before. A sense of well-being and hope carries them through and helps parents to assume their familial responsibilities together in love so that they may develop fully as human beings.

Dr. Leonie MacSweeney of Nigeria reports that in parts of Africa, most families with no male child suffer greatly, especially women, who continue to have many more children than they would have had otherwise. A special successful application of the Billings Method for baby sex pre-selection can solve the problem, restore the balance of the sexes, and in the long run, raise the status of women. There is a 96 per cent success rate for boys and 89 per cent for girls.

Husbands like this method because it leads to increased lovemaking in the relationship and communication is enhanced as a result. The wife's status is raised as he sees her grow in confidence and dignity. Together they make responsible family size decisions. Carrying a card proving they are using a method they like is often helpful to show population control officials. Side effects of contraception leave a wife unwell without access to local health care and now, with the use of a safe method that is in keeping with natural law, a husband is delighted to see his wife well.

There are, indeed, very debilitating emotional and physical side effects of steroidal, hormonal abortifacient contraception and abortion. Fertility may be damaged or lost. Women who have had one or several abortions are speaking out about their regret in a campaign called "Silent no more". They bear witness to the fact that fertility is often seen as a disease in the medical profession and something to be suppressed, leading to loss of dignity and women viewed as sex objects. There is no need to remove fertility from the bodies of women or men, especially using means that actually endanger health and well-being. According to Dr. Hanna Klaus, obstetrician and gynaecologist, who began an abstinence-based fertility awareness programme in Africa (www.teenstarprogram.org), contraceptive steroids bind to sex hormone-binding globulins and reduce a woman's libido, and thus the means to "liberate" women for sex actually removes their desire for it.

In conclusion, we urge Governments to: (a) promote breastfeeding and include the Billings Ovulation Method within Government family planning choices because of the benefits outlined (no strings attached funding for development of teacher training programmes would be welcome (www.thebillingsovulationmethod.org)); (b) resist pressure for abortion on demand and reclaim "reproductive health" to the true sense of the term, to be excluding abortion; and (c) increase access to maternal and child health care in the certain knowledge that a well mother is empowered and resourceful in contributing to poverty reduction in the family.